

Daylilies & Dormancy: Fact & Fiction

Contrary to popular opinion, dormant and hardy are (always) not hand-in-hand

What does dormant mean?

Daylily foliage can be classified into three fairly distinct categories:

- **Dormant** – All the foliage dies back to the ground during winter. The plant then forms new leaf buds at the crown of the plant.
- **Evergreen** – The foliage above ground remains green and alive throughout the year. It may stop growing in colder weather, but the plant attempts to keep its leaves going.
- **Semi-evergreen** – This is nothing more than a way of saying that the plant shows characteristics of both dormant and evergreen traits.

Most people work by the rule of thumb that the more dormant a daylily is, the better it will live in colder climate; and along the same lines, daylilies that are more evergreen will not grow as well in colder climates. This is, for the most part, a good rule to follow. For nearly 80% of daylilies, their foliage truly represents their hardiness. There are, however, exceptions to the rule (of course).

Hard Dormant / Soft Dormant

Daylilies are deemed “hard dormant” die well into the ground and form hard buds during winter. You can poke your fingers into the ground and feel something that feels a lot like a hazelnut just beneath the surface. These daylilies are truly the hardiest of all, and have been known to survive in certain areas of a zone 3 climate. That’s cold.

“Soft dormant”, as you could probably guess, die back to ground level and form buds that can sometimes feel a bit squishy. They do not shut down quite as well as hard dormant do, and they therefore begin growing a bit earlier in the spring, which can leave them susceptible to be hurt by late frosts. Many soft dormant perform extremely well in very cold climates, though I doubt you’ll find any in the extreme climates of zone 3, or possibly parts zone 4 also. Some, however, can be hurt badly in cold in spring as far south as zone 6.

Evergreen Everywhere

Ok, now that we know that not all dormant are hardy, I have to tell you that not all evergreens are tender. Case in point: *Hemerocallis* x ‘Scarlet Orbit’. This daylily is truly an evergreen. It attempts to hold its foliage above ground throughout the year. For many daylilies, this trait means, at best, a 50/50 chance of survival in zone 6, and even worse further north. ‘Scarlet Orbit’, though, has been known to not only survive, but perform very well in colder parts of zone 5. How is this? Well, it could be attributed to many things, but when it comes down to it, there are millions of genes that make up a daylily. Some control color, some control foliage, and some may very well control how hardy the plant is. I, unfortunately, don’t have all the answers (for that matter, I don’t have many answers at all, or at least that’s the way I feel sometimes).

Lack of Registration Legislation

To register a daylily, you need to have quantifiable information about the cultivar you wish to register (flower size, scape height, etc.) and you need to say whether your plant is dormant, evergreen, or semi-evergreen. Here’s the issue, though. Measurements are standardized by governments. An inch is always an inch. A 26” scape in Florida is still a 26” scape in New Jersey. Semi-evergreen, on the other hand, is purely the registrant’s feelings on what he or she believes the plant to truly be. What might be semi-evergreen to me could very well be evergreen to someone else. Along the same lines, what might be dormant in one climate or one type of soil could be semi-evergreen in another place. And, by the way, even the best daylily hybridizers in the country will be the first to tell you that mistakes are often made.

And so the answer is . . .

I hate to say it, but the answer is truly to live and learn. Talk to people in your area, like your local garden retailer. Most good independent garden retailers choose only daylily cultivars that are known to perform well in your area. Chances are, if they have brought it in to sell, it has been tried and true for your climate. Also, a great place to find tons of information is your local daylily hybridizers. Search the internet and you'll be amazed to see that there are chapters of the American Hemerocallis Society all over the country and in Canada. Talking to groups of people in your area, you can find out which cultivars they have tried and which ones perform best for them.